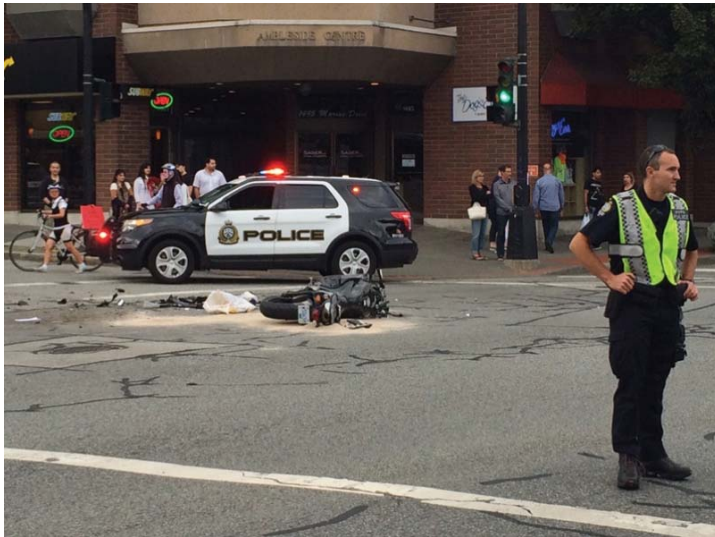


GRINDING GEARS: What if we got rid of traffic lights? Seriously

[Brendan McAleer](#) / North Shore News

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A smashed motorcycle marks the scene of a crash that sent two to hospital with serious injuries. Three vehicles reportedly tried to beat the yellow light. photo supplied Babak Nouri

So here's a thought: is the amber traffic light outdated?

I'm serious, should we do away with it altogether? Certainly there are those who wouldn't miss it much, seeing as they already regard amber as being a sort of variant of green anyway.

"Oh look, one of those extra green lights! Must floor the accelerator as though I've just hit a power boost in Mario Kart!"

Two Sundays back, a three-way crash between a motorcycle, a sedan, and an SUV occurred at the busy intersection of 15th and Marine Drive in West Vancouver. All three are alleged to have been trying to beat a yellow light, with the westbound SUV turning in front of the motorcycle. The bike was heavily damaged, and the two riders seriously injured.

Blame is there in plenty to be handed out, and the police will likely be ticketing all three involved. However, it's not like this is an isolated incident. Regularly I see drivers hurtling through lights just nanoseconds before the amber changes to red. Hardly anyone seems to watch for stale green lights and prepare themselves to stop if necessary – everyone's just in too much of a hurry.

Signals rule our driving lives (except, of course, when we're apparently not paying attention to them). We curse inwardly when we hit a particularly long light during our regular commutes, or when putting on your indicator causes the car beside you to zip forward to close the gap. We roll our eyes as somebody fails to stop while making a right turn on a red light, then pulls out in front of traffic at about four kilometres per hour. We shake our heads as pedestrians step off the curb, glued to their phones with the countdown reading two seconds remaining to cross four lanes.

And so, sometimes I feel like we should just throw the whole mess away. Without signals, intersections would feel dangerous, because they are. And being worried might make us safer.

As crazy as this idea sounds, it's actually had traction in a few places. In the developing world, there are more than a few intersections where traffic simply figures out how to get past each other without any signals whatsoever. Meskel

Square in Ethiopia is the intersection of two eight-lane major roads, but the cars and buses all just slow down and squeeze past each other.

In Portishead, U.K., a small coastal town west of London, they simply turned their traffic lights off at certain intersections. Strangely, and seeming to fly in the face of common sense, accidents slowed. People stopped getting hurt.

The same thing happened in the town of Drachten, in the Netherlands, which has no traffic lights at all. At one intersection, the accident rate dropped from nine per year to just a single one.

The idea is an extreme one, but there's maybe something else going on here we can use. Part of what happens when you remove traffic lights from an area is that people start paying less attention to the signage, and more to their fellow travellers. That means drivers making more eye contact with pedestrians and cyclists, pedestrians signalling their intent to drivers, drivers trusting less that other drivers are going to yield based on the lights, and everyone showing a little patience.

It's a funny thing: even if your grocery store is really crowded, it'd be pretty weird if somebody just blithely rammed you with a cart when you came out of the cereal aisle. Get in a car though, and it's like we see the green light and just head full tilt for the metaphorical dairy section.

While the city planners and police departments try to figure things out, there are some things we can do as drivers to keep ourselves safe. First, expect that everyone is an idiot. Not you, dear reader, you're no idiot. You are smart and charming, and say, is that a new shirt? Very fetching. Matches your eyes.

But that guy over your left shoulder there? See him? The one picking his nose. Do you really expect that he's going to know to slow for that late yellow? Maybe just take a heartbeat or two to start moving in case he blows right through it.

And don't grimace too much and mutter under your breath. Ease your blood-pressure, karma has a way of catching up with miscreants like this. Let's just all hope nobody else has to become part of their eventual comeuppance.

mcaleeronwheels@gmail.com